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AIR OCCUPATION
ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
DISCLAIMER.....	ii
PREFACE	iv
ABSTRACT	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Asking the Right Questions.....	2
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE TERM AIR OCCUPATION?	5
Air Occupation Objectives	6
Air Occupation Tasks	7
Appropriateness of the Term Air Occupation	10
Alternative for the Term Air Occupation	11
WHAT ARE THE U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF AIR OCCUPATION?.....	15
Historic Precedents—Air Control	16
Words—National Security Strategy	18
Actions—Intervention Trends	19
Implications	22
CONCLUSION	25
What Do We Mean By the Term Air Occupation?	26
What Are the U.S. Foreign Policy Implications of Air Occupation?	26
Bottom Line.....	27
BIBLIOGRAPHY	29

Preface

One of Colonel John A. Warden's controversial ideas is that airpower permits the virtual occupation of enemy territory by aircraft without requiring a potentially entangling and costly ground occupation. Although this concept of *air occupation* has received some attention lately, the idea is not new. Unfortunately, the age of the concept has not added clarity to its definition. I chose to research this subject because I felt many of the related studies and arguments focused too much on the “how” and not enough on the “why.” As alluring and parochially rewarding as *air occupation* may seem, the U.S. Air Force cannot afford to commit dwindling resources to missions or capabilities that are not compatible with U.S. foreign policy or the service’s core competencies. We need to understand the definition and implications of *air occupation* because the question may not be “can we,” but rather “should we?”

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Abstract

Asking the right questions. The adage “be careful what you wish for—you may get it” should be on the minds of airpower advocates coveting the *air occupation* mission. It may be a double-edged sword that expands the relative influence of the U.S. Air Force, but also saddles it with a complex, persistent, and costly mission. The U.S. Air Force must ensure it asks the right questions before embarking on a serious campaign to “win” the *air occupation* debate.

What do we mean by the term air occupation? The term *air occupation* can be very perplexing. Unfortunately, neither the term *air occupation*, nor the word *occupation*, is defined in Joint or Air Force doctrine. Of the many historic occupation objectives, *air occupation* most likely applies to less intrusive scenarios that attempt to coerce, enforce sanctions, or create buffer zones. Probable *air occupation* tasks to achieve these objectives would include a combination of presence, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, psychological operations, humanitarian airdrops and airlift, and punitive strikes. The U.S. Air Force could reduce some of the intellectual resistance to *air occupation* by using the term *air intervention* instead. This would unload the parochial and legal baggage associated with the word “occupation” and link it to the extensive discourse on intervention theory.

What are the U.S. foreign policy implications of air occupation? The current National Security Strategy criterion for costs and risks that are commensurate with the

interest at stake, coupled with U.S. intervention trends, indicates there will be a growing “market” for an *air occupation* option. The big payoff for *air occupation* could be early consensus to intervene sooner, when the risks are lower and the chances of success greater. Nonetheless, we must be wary of mistaking *air occupation* as a quick-fix to problems that require a long-term commitment to achieve lasting conflict resolution. Our task is to ensure U.S. leaders understand the allure of “low cost” intervention and guard against its misuse. A primary concern should be the fear of making intervention too easy and substituting airpower for logic—intervening because we *can*, rather than because we *should*.

Bottom Line. *Air occupation*, or alternatively, *air intervention*, is a viable concept as long as we understand that it is not appropriate for all scenarios. As the only full-time airpower service, the U.S. Air Force must develop and publish *air occupation* doctrine to provide guidance on what it believes to be true about applicability, objectives, tasks, techniques, and procedures. Although the U.S. Air Force should focus on key strategic, rather than supporting, roles and missions to preserve its autonomy, it must also ensure the concept of *air occupation* is not oversold to the point of creating a “market” that dominates its existence. Every sortie and dollar committed to unnecessary roles and missions is a resource lost to preparing for the military’s primary task as defined in *Joint Vision 2010*: to fight and win our nation’s wars.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Among the many devices by which domestic factions avoid joining the essential, but all too touchy issues, is to debate the timing of a crucial decision without ever discussing whether or not the move should be made at all.¹

—Fred Charles Iklé

To many, the increasingly frequent use of the term *air occupation* is the equivalent of distant war drums—a precursor to the upcoming battles over the dwindling budget and relevance in the post-Cold War environment. This subject is clearly polarized between those who love and those who hate the concept. Adding fuel to the fire is the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) directed by the Armed Forces Structure Review Act of 1996. The charter of this review is to determine the defense strategy and establish a Revised Defense Program through the year 2005. No doubt, the U.S. Air Force should focus on key strategic, rather than supporting, roles and missions in order to preserve its autonomy.² The U.S. Air Force's survival as a *dominant* service will hinge on where it focuses its scarce resources to prepare for the challenges of the 21st century. If current trends continue, when the ball drops in Times Square on 1 January 2000 the U.S. Air Force will be a smaller service, subsisting on an ever-shrinking defense budget. By the year 2000, the U.S. Armed Forces will lose another 64,000 active-duty troops, leveling at approximately 1,418,000—thirty-five percent smaller than the Cold War force of 1987.³

Procurement has stagnated for more than a decade, but FY 1997 was supposed to be the turnaround year. Unfortunately, or some may say predictably, the FY 1997 procurement budget dropped again, “falling to the lowest level since before the outbreak of the Korean War.”⁴ As a share of U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP), defense spending dropped to 3.2 percent in 1997 and is forecast to drop to 2.7 percent in FY 2002—less than half the 6.3 percent of GDP allocated to defense in the “growth” years of the mid-1980s.⁵ In fact, the U.S. Air Force Program Objectives Memorandum 98 (POM FY 1998-2003) leaves \$15.7B of validated unfunded requirements.⁶ In this fiscally constrained environment, the adage “be careful what you wish for—you may get it” should be on the minds of airpower advocates coveting the *air occupation* mission. It could very well be a double-edged sword that expands the relative influence of the U.S. Air Force, but also saddles it with a complex, persistent, and costly mission. For example, the trend of open-ended commitments of U.S. airpower-only force packages to “stabilize” scenarios (e.g., Operations Provide Comfort and Southern Watch in Iraq) would accelerate if the concept of *air occupation* is embraced by our leaders. How far can this “residual” airpower role be stretched before it impacts our ability to respond to major contingencies or a true peer competitor (e.g., China)?

Asking the Right Questions

The U.S. Air Force must ensure it asks the right questions before embarking on a serious campaign to “win” the *air occupation* debate. The discourse on the concept of *air occupation* has swirled primarily around issues of *how* airpower could be used in an occupation role. Typically the focus is on innovations in sensor and weapon technology

that could reduce, or eliminate, the need for troops on the ground. The U.S. Air Force Scientific Advisory Board identified numerous sensor requirements for the 21st century: low-cost space-based surveillance systems on small satellites, launched on demand; broadband low frequency Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) to detect concealed targets; unattended seismic, acoustic or chemical ground sensors; and detectors placed in food, equipment, manufacturing facilities, or even in personnel to measure anxiety and stress.⁷ Of course, sensors are not a panacea. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. had the Ho Chi Minh Trail “wired like a pinball machine” with sensors, but still failed to stop the flow of North Vietnamese men and supplies.⁸ Even if the sensors of the 21st century are more reliable, control requires not only situational awareness, but also the political will and capability to influence or stop unacceptable activity. In a politically sensitive environment, non-lethal weapons would be invaluable—weapons that incapacitate rather than kill, or disable rather than destroy equipment. For example, caustic substances that destroy a weapon’s sensors or lasers that blind the operators; “infrasound” that disrupts human beings’ capacity to function or foam so sticky they cannot move; and lubricants so slippery that equipment cannot maintain traction.⁹ Before initiating a costly sensor and non-lethal weapon shopping spree, the U.S. Air Force must first ask and answer two important questions:

- What do we mean by the term air occupation?
- What are the U.S. foreign policy implications of air occupation?

In the minds of many airpower enthusiasts, the U.S. Air Force may have already conducted *air occupation* campaigns, but is this justification that we *should*? We must develop consensus on a proper definition as it relates to objectives and tasks—only then

can we assess the likely implications and utility of the concept to our national leaders. If *air occupation* does not align with anticipated U.S. foreign policy, then we cannot afford to commit scarce resources and assets to a “product” with no market. Conversely, if *air occupation* is a likely tool our national leaders will demand, then we must understand the implications. As the only full-time airpower service, it is the responsibility of the U.S. Air Force to define and explore the implications of *air occupation*.

Notes

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⁸Colonel Darrel D. Whitcomb, “Air Power and the Ho Chi Minh Trail,” *Airpower and Campaign Planning*, Air Command and Staff College Coursebook, Volume 8, March 1997, 270-272.

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Chapter 2

What Do We Mean By the Term Air Occupation?

*Airpower is the most difficult of all forms of military force to measure, or even to express in precise terms.*¹

—Winston Churchill

The term *air occupation* usually elicits a visceral response or parochial mantra. A typical rejoinder to an *air occupation* advocate is “airpower has never held ground.” In many cases, those debating the viability of *air occupation* talk past each other because the terms of reference are inconsistent. Adding fog to the doctrinal landscape is the grab-bag of related terms airpower advocates use: air control, air dominance, and air pressure. The American Heritage Dictionary defines *occupation* as “the invasion, conquest, and control of a nation or territory by a foreign military force.”² According to General Ronald Fogleman, U.S. Air Force chief of staff:

In Iraq, we have used land-based and carrier-based air forces to maintain an air occupation of Iraq for the past five years. That operation has contained Iraq, it has enforced UN sanctions and it has compelled Saddam Hussein to accept the most intrusive UN inspection regime in history.³

If we turn to official Joint and Air Force doctrine for descriptive guidance, we find none of the previously mentioned terms, nor the word *occupation*, are defined in the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (JP 1-02), the *Air Force Basic Aerospace Doctrine Manual* (AFM 1-1), or the draft of the new *Air Force Basic Doctrine*

Document (AFDD 1). In order to truly understand what *air occupation* means, we must define the objectives and tasks associated with the mission. Ultimately, this process will clarify the concept and help us decide if the term *air occupation* is appropriate.

Air Occupation Objectives

Common objectives for gaining control over enemy territory are to coerce, enforce sanctions, obtain a buffer zone, obtain raw and natural resources, control for cultural assimilation, territorial annexation, and revenge. Depending on the objectives, Seabury and Codevilla defined enforcement options that include merely making the enemy government relinquish its unacceptable objectives (e.g., the British following the American Revolution), or the worst case, “replacing its government and cleansing the defeated society of those responsible for the conflict, punishing it, and exacting reparations” (e.g., those parts of Germany occupied by the Soviets after World War II).⁴ It is important to note, the attainment of these objectives does not necessarily require actual fighting. Merely the threat of force has prompted some 20th century governments to abandon contentious objectives (e.g., Taiwan) or relinquish control of their country (e.g., Haiti).

So, what are the objectives of *air occupation*? Do we mean to imply that airpower is appropriate for all occupation objectives and scenarios? More than likely, airpower is most applicable to those less intrusive scenarios with objectives that involve coercion, enforcement of sanctions, and creation of a buffer zone—influencing another state, but not replacing a government or annexing territory. “The Gulf War confirmed the Air Force’s ever-increasing ability to destroy military things and people, but airpower did not

demonstrate an ability to change governments.”⁵ In the Gulf War Air Power Survey, Hallion described how *air occupation* was employed in Desert Storm:

Airpower can hold territory by denying an enemy the ability to seize it, and by denying an enemy the use of his forces. And it can seize territory by controlling access to that territory and movement across it. It did both in the Gulf War.⁶

The decision to use airpower should consider: the scale of conflict or effectiveness of the cease-fire; number, discipline, and accountability of contending parties; efficacy of local government; degree to which law and order exists; and the willingness of the population at large to cooperate.⁷ The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1980 to 1986 eventually relied almost entirely on airpower.⁸ Failure to understand the contextual elements and their impact on airpower ultimately led to an embarrassing and costly Soviet defeat. By recognizing *air occupation* only applies to a subset of the military occupation objectives, it allows us to focus on a more realistic and manageable set of tasks to achieve the mission.

Air Occupation Tasks

Carl Builder identified four tasks the U.S. Air Force must accomplish to operate in what he calls the *constabulary* role: immediately engage and suppress heavy weapons fire; stop surreptitious flights by low and slow flyers; suppress street disorders and violence; and insert/recover a small package of people and equipment in austere conditions.⁹ Although these are important tasks, *air occupation* entails more than merely functioning as air police. The search for applicable occupation tasks could begin with Army doctrine. Army Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, outlines post-conflict operations that appear to be likely occupation tasks: control population and refugees, control

prisoners, mark mine fields, destroy unexploded ordnance, provide emergency health service and humanitarian assistance, provide emergency restoration of utilities, and support the social and civil affairs needs of the population.¹⁰ If we dig deeper, we find another set of possible occupation tasks defined in Army Field Manual 100-23, *Peace Operations*: observation and monitoring of truces and cease fires, restoration and maintenance of order and stability, protection of humanitarian assistance, guarantee and denial of movement, enforcement of sanctions, and the establishment and supervision of protected zones.¹¹ Unfortunately, this comparative method exemplifies a common handicap of airpower advocates—our dependence on Army terminology. According to airpower historian Phillip Meilinger:

The Army provided a ready vocabulary for early airmen, but by adopting a lexicon that centered on surface warfare, advocates of land-based airpower became trapped in a prison house of language. They continued to rely on an adopted language that not only circumscribed their thinking, but also included an increasingly inadequate collection of terms and categories to describe the nature of air warfare and its objectives.¹²

This warning begs the question: do we merely step through the tasks of a traditional military occupation and apply airpower, or do we start with a blank piece of paper? Rather than build our definition based on a classical perception, which relegates airpower to merely a *supporting* role, we should reconsider the likely *air occupation* objectives: coerce, enforce sanctions, and deny the use of territory. *Air occupation* tasks to achieve these objectives would be a combination of presence, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, humanitarian airdrops and airlift, and punitive strikes. The last two tasks provide the “carrot and stick” of coercion and enforcement. If we stopped there, we

would forgo a tremendous tool: aerial psychological operations. In his book, *Occupation*, Eric Carlton, makes a very important point:

Control is normally achieved through a combination of force which induces compliance, and persuasion and/or indoctrination which generates a sense of commitment. In other words, control is either attained by compulsion, which in the end, is frequently counter-productive, or by some kind of value-consensus which is often very difficult to effect, but which can pay handsome dividends.¹³

Many of the studies addressing the concept of *air occupation* focus on coercion, but fail to explore value-control which was so expertly employed by General MacArthur during the occupation of Japan after World War II. Of course, fear that Japan would fall into the sphere of Communism was the primary motivation for the seemingly altruistic U.S. occupation policy:

Never before in recorded history had a great power moved in upon another, taking over its affairs almost completely at first, gradually relinquishing control, and finally restoring sovereignty with such a minimum of friction and such a large measure of benevolence.¹⁴

Some form of physical repression may be necessary, but focusing on the cultural aspects to exploit the population's existing system of checks, balances, and norms is the key to long-term success. In fact, psychological operations to win the hearts and minds of the population are probably easier to conduct without the intrusive "in your face" presence of ground troops. Some ready examples of aerial psychological tasks are leaflet drops, television programming, and radio broadcasts—this would also include denial of these mediums to subversive groups.

Accomplishing *air occupation* tasks to achieve the associated objectives may require nothing more than combining existing technology and systems in new and innovative ways (e.g., Gunships, UAVs, AWACS, JSTARS, V-22 Osprey, and space-based assets).

As we consider the possibilities, one nagging question persists: given the doctrinal void on the subject of *occupation*, is *air occupation* an appropriate term?

Appropriateness of the Term Air Occupation

Conventional international law recognizes only one form of military occupation: belligerent occupation. According to the Hague Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, “as long as the territory as a whole is in the power and under the control of the occupant and as long as the latter has the ability to make his will felt everywhere in the territory within a reasonable time, military occupation exists from a legal point of view.”¹⁵ The classical definition of belligerent occupation recognizes armed conflict is not always a prerequisite. In some cases, merely the threat to use force coerced a government to relinquish control of its territory (e.g., Haiti). Article 2 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states “belligerent occupation and the responsibilities of occupants shall apply even to an occupation that meets with no armed resistance.”¹⁶

If the operation is labeled an “occupation,” the occupier is bound by international law to certain responsibilities: the occupying power is not permitted to annex the occupied territory, is expected to “respect and maintain the political and other institutions that exist, and is responsible for the management of public order and civil life in the territory under its control.”¹⁷ The purpose of the law of occupation is to prevent the imposition of disruptive changes in the occupied territory and balance the occupant’s military requirements with humanitarian interests.¹⁸

The utopian nature of the law of occupation has prompted the U.S., and other states victorious in war, to avoid labeling operations in conquered territory as “occupations,”

thus precluding the restrictions and responsibilities. Common excuses are: use of force was in support of another state whose government asked for intervention (e.g., Soviets in Afghanistan, U.S. in Grenada); the occupants were interested in permanent control over enemy territory (e.g., Iraq taking Kuwait, Indonesia taking East Timor); or when historic ownership of the territory is disputed by the warring factions (e.g., Israeli occupied territories). Another more recent excuse for not invoking the term “occupation” is to avoid creating the impression the occupant plans to stay in the territory for a long time (e.g., Operations Provide Comfort and Southern Watch in Iraq).¹⁹

It is quite clear the use of the word “occupation” is a contemporary taboo and places a cloud of doubt over the utility of the term *air occupation*. Rather than carry all the baggage associated with “occupations,” it may be wise to consider an alternative term.

Alternative for the Term Air Occupation

There are many terms competing in the intellectual marketplace with the term *air occupation*: air control, air pressure, and air dominance to name a few. Unfortunately, none of these prevailing terms adequately captures the *air occupation* objectives and tasks defined earlier. Air control and air pressure are not appropriate because they appear to focus exclusively on coercion. Although air dominance is the most likely alternative, it is normally associated with air superiority and air supremacy—a prerequisite, but not the underlying goal. Regardless of whether we conducted *air occupation* in pre- or post-hostilities, the primary desire would be to achieve our goals without war. Surely we would not conduct *air occupation* for its own sake, but rather to achieve political objectives—a better state of peace. As Captain James Poss at the Naval War College

theorized, how is that different from the gunboat diplomacy the U.S. Navy employed for years?²⁰ Sir James Cable defined gunboat diplomacy as:

The use or threat of limited naval force, otherwise than as an act of war, in order to secure advantage, or to avert loss, either in the furtherance of an international dispute or else against foreign nationals within territory or the jurisdiction of their own state.²¹

Ultimately, gunboat diplomacy was nothing more than intervention: “the interference of one state or government in the affairs of another.”²² Although hesitant to introduce another term into the arena, the U.S. Air Force could reduce some of the intellectual resistance to *air occupation* by using the term *air intervention* instead. This one term could be used to capture the Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) missions that may be conducted exclusively with airpower: enforcement of sanctions, enforcing exclusion zones, and peace operations. In fact, if we take the pulse of current doctrine and politically-correct thinking, it appears the concept of *occupation* has been renamed *peace operations*:

Military operations to support diplomatic efforts to reach a long-term political settlement and categorized as peacekeeping operations and peace enforcement operations. Peace operations are conducted in conjunction with the various diplomatic activities necessary to secure a negotiated truce and resolve the conflict. Military peace operations are tailored to each situation and may be conducted in support of diplomatic activities before, during or after conflict.²³

For example, if we insert the word “airpower” into the Joint Pub 1-02 definition for *peace enforcement*, it would read: application of *airpower* or the threat of its use, normally pursuant to international authorization, to compel compliance with resolutions or sanctions designed to maintain or restore peace and order.²⁴

There are two primary advantages to using the term *air intervention*. First and most important, it unloads the parochial and legal baggage associated with the word “occupa-

tion.” Second, using the word *intervention* links the concept to the extensive intellectual discourse on why nations interfere with the affairs of another state. *Air intervention* should be “marketed” to the Combatant Commanders (CINCs) as merely one of the many tools available to deal with MOOTW scenarios. It is not surprising the U.S. Air Force Doctrine Document on MOOTW, AFDD 2-3, does not mention the concept of *air occupation*—remember, it is a taboo term. Removing the conceptual shackles by using a different term may be the catalyst that invigorates the U.S. Air Force to explore, and eventually define, what it believes to be true about the exclusive employment of airpower to coerce and control.

Notes

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⁵Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *The General’s War*, (NY: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 474.

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²⁴Joint Pub 1-02, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 23 March 1994, 314.

Chapter 3

What are the U.S. Foreign Policy Implications of Air Occupation?

*Airpower is an unusually seductive form of military strength, in part because, like modern courtship, it appears to offer gratification without commitment.*¹

—Eliot Cohen, Director of the Gulf War Air Power Survey

Just as in war, airpower can also be applied in MOOTW to achieve political goals. The concept and practice of exclusive reliance on airpower to achieve national objectives is nothing new—there are historic precedents. The question is, can we conclude airpower will be called upon by our leaders to conduct *air occupation* missions in the future? If we determine there is no “demand” for *air occupation*, we must decide whether the “product” is worthy of the time and energy necessary to create a “market” for it. Alternatively, if we believe *air occupation* will be a popular military tool in the future, we must ensure we understand the implications and shape expectations. To assess the *air occupation* “market” we can project into the future using the current National Security Strategy as a predictor of need. Of course, actions speak louder than words—to capture this variable, we can extrapolate from the U.S. intervention trends of the last fifteen years.

Historic Precedents—Air Control

A relatively recent example of military air control theory was conceived by Elvira Fradkin in 1950. She proposed creating a United Nations Air Police Patrol (UNAPP) to allow the U.S. and Soviet Union to disarm by entrusting the premier instrument of military power (i.e., airpower) to the United Nations.² Her justification for using air policing was simple:

Airpower has the advantage of immediate availability as a disciplinary force. It has the further advantage of being able to exercise discipline without interference in the normal routine of any nation's peaceful domestic affairs. And in the third place it can reach any area on the earth's surface without effective intervention.³

Mr. Gill Wilson, President of the National Aeronautic Association at the time, stated “the use of an international air police by the United Nations has intrigued the imagination of many; national sovereignty cannot exist without control of the air.”⁴ Although Ms. Fradkin's disarmament hypothesis is questionable, she did broach an interesting proposition that was predicated on the inherent strengths of airpower to unilaterally influence and control the actions of another nation.

A more practical precedent for *air occupation* is the British air control experience in Iraq from 1920 - 1939. Anyone who has followed the *air occupation* debate is probably weary of comparisons with the British in 1920, but the similarities are striking and worth repeating. Although victorious in World War I, Britain still “had to deal with restive populations and disorders of all sorts in its empire.”⁵ Tribal warfare and border conflicts were common in the Middle East and Africa—not very different than today. The costs associated with garrisoning all these locations were tremendous and quickly became unacceptable to the British people. As a cheaper alternative, the Royal Air Force (RAF)

proposed the exclusive use of airpower to control the territories of the empire. The RAF proposal was accepted and in 1919 Winston Churchill declared “the first duty of the RAF is to garrison the British Empire.”⁶ This initiative not only filled a need for the British government, it also prevented the RAF from being downsized and allowed them to capture a larger share of the dwindling military resources pie. For more than eight years the RAF successfully accomplished the air control goals of long-term political stability, pacification, and administration.⁷

It is not surprising the issue of *air occupation* or *air control* has reemerged. The U.S. economic “empire” spans the globe—a world torn by increasing ethnic, religious, and nationalistic tensions. The task and costs of protecting our interests in this volatile environment are enormous. Some may say the rekindling of the *air occupation* discussion is driven by the U.S. Air Force’s fear of downsizing initiatives—specifically the Quadrennial Defense Review. While this may be true, it does not discount the precedence of exclusive employment of airpower to successfully control activity on the ground to achieve political goals. Of course, we must be cognizant of the fact this took place in a low threat environment, in the desert, and with very limited objectives. In fact, these conditions are very similar to those that exist in Operations Southern Watch and Provide Comfort in Iraq. Obviously, a Vietnam or Bosnia scenario offers a distinctly different set of challenges. Regardless of the threat environment or geography of future U.S. interventions, the National Security Strategy should still apply.

Words—National Security Strategy

The central goals of the United States, as defined in the current National Security Strategy (NSS), are to “enhance our security with military forces that are ready to fight and with effective representation abroad, bolster America’s economic revitalization, and promote democracy abroad.”⁸ The underlying premise of the document is economically stable and democratic states “are less likely to threaten our interests and more likely to cooperate with the United States to meet security threats.”⁹ At first glance, this may seem utopian; nonetheless, the desire to enlarge the community of “secure and democratic nations” was used as justification for the U.S. intervention in Haiti.¹⁰ Of course, this discounts the fact preventing a potential refugee crisis on the shores of Florida, a key electoral state, was politically expedient. The NSS supports the concept of a less intrusive *air occupation* option—allowing the indigenous society to resolve their problems and using the military to merely provide a window of opportunity:

We recognize, however, that while force can defeat an aggressor, it cannot solve underlying problems. Democracy and economic prosperity can take root in a struggling society only through local solutions carried out by the society itself. We must use military force selectively, recognizing that its use may do no more than provide a window of opportunity for a society—and diplomacy—to work.¹¹

The NSS defines three categories of national interest that merit the use of U.S. armed forces: *vital* interests that impact the survival and security of the nation (e.g., defending U.S. borders and our economic vitality); *important* interests, but not vital to national survival (e.g., Bosnia); and *humanitarian* interests.¹² Although *humanitarian* interests are probably more numerous, the NSS is hesitant to employ military force in these situations because “the military is not the best tool to address humanitarian concerns.”¹³

On the other end of the spectrum are the less numerous *vital* interests, which most likely would require the focused efforts of all aspects of the military instrument of power—the stakes are too high. This still leaves a sizable number of prospective *important* interests. The NSS defines criterion for the use of military force in these situations: a high probability the forces can achieve the objectives, *the costs and risks of their use are commensurate with the interests at stake*, and other means have been tried and failed to achieve the objectives (e.g., Haiti and Bosnia).¹⁴ Given that we are discussing only *important* interests, the threshold of acceptable pain is likely to be quite low. This is exacerbated by the general NSS criteria for the use of military forces anytime: a reasonable likelihood of support from the American people and their elected representatives.¹⁵ Any significant risk to American lives will probably be perceived as unacceptable. All these factors are predictors that there is a “market” for a less costly and lower risk *air occupation* option. If you accept the premise that *peace operations* is a politically correct way of saying *occupation*, then the following NSS statement would indicate not only a market, but a “growth” market for *air occupation*:

In addition to preparing for major regional contingencies and overseas presence, we must prepare our forces for peace operations to support democracy or conflict resolution. From traditional peacekeeping to peace enforcement, multinational peace operations are sometimes the best way to prevent, contain or resolve conflicts that could otherwise be far more costly and deadly.¹⁶

Actions—Intervention Trends

The NSS allows us to project the “intent” of the U.S. government, but this is only a *recipe* of foreign policy—the proof is in the pudding. Previous actions may be a better predictor to extrapolate U.S. intervention policy into the 21st century. The U.S. has never

been shy about involving itself in the internal affairs and domestic politics of other nations to satisfy its national interests. The use of gunboat diplomacy and Marines was a staple of the U.S. political-military landscape in Central America. Although U.S. operations are usually cloaked in the guise of moral crusades, few of the early interventions were conducted “exclusively to promote the rights of individuals and groups over the rights of state sovereignty.”¹⁷ The majority of these forays were not prompted by *vital* interests, but rather *important* interests.

Since 1945, there have been over 160 major conflicts, and the U.S. military was deployed over 242 times. In January 1990 alone there were 32 major armed conflicts, and of these 29 were ethnic, religious, or racial.¹⁸ The list of major U.S. interventions over the last 15 years is, depending on your point of view, either impressive or depressing: Beirut 1983, Grenada 1983 (Urgent Fury), Panama 1989 (Just Cause), Kuwait/Saudi Arabia 1990-1991 (Desert Shield, Desert Storm), Iraq 1991+ (Provide Comfort, Southern Watch), Somalia 1992 (Restore Hope), Haiti 1994 (Uphold Democracy), and the continuing saga in the Former Yugoslavia (Provide Promise, Deny Flight, Sharp Guard, Able Sentry, Deliberate Force, Joint Endeavor). In addition to the standard bogeymen (i.e., terrorism, WMD, religion, ethnicity) there are other reasons this trend may continue, if not accelerate. First and foremost is the fact we are no longer constrained by superpower competition with the Soviet Union, and therefore may perceive intervention as less risky.¹⁹ Another predictor, exemplified in the NSS, is the emphasis on democracy and human rights in U.S. foreign policy. This may mean the U.S. will increasingly justify intervention to promote American *values* as well as defend American *interests*.²⁰ Nonetheless, American economic interests will still be a driving factor. In fact, this may

explain why intervention sentiment is still so strong even though the threat of communism and its containment are no longer paramount. Stephen Shalom labeled this underlying economic motivation theory the “Imperial Alibis”:

The Soviet Union did indeed behave in an imperial manner and did have armed forces far larger than needed for its legitimate self-defense. But U.S. officials have always exaggerated the Bolshevik bogey in order to justify their own inflated military machine, which has primed the U.S. economy and been deployed against the forces of social change in the Third World that challenge U.S. hegemony and economic interests.²¹

This poignant statement suggests U.S. policy will likely continue to be driven by economic interests—that is, capitalism. Even if we accept this premise, there will still be “calls for intervention anywhere there is disaster, disorder, or other large scale suffering that exceeds the capacity or inclination of a regional government.”²² British Air Vice-Marshall R.A. Mason highlighted an interesting paradox which may also expand U.S. involvement in regional conflicts:

If regional conflict or instability derives from ethnic, racial, national or territorial disputes, those neighboring countries with the greatest interests at stake may also be those whose intervention is likely to be regarded with the greatest suspicion by one or more of the contestants. Conversely, if disinterest is to be a criterion of military intervention to resolve a conflict, sustain peace or even protect humanitarian activities, what motivation will compel a state to allocate resources and perhaps incur casualties for a cause in which by definition it has little, if any, interest?²³

The U.S. will likely feel compelled to intervene in these regional conflicts for moral reasons, regardless of the National Security Strategy. Thus, although the *recipe* may call for limited and focused use of military forces, credibility as a benevolent superpower may demand more. Regardless of “why” the U.S. chooses to intervene, risk aversion will be a paramount component. Many times this has led to the selection of airpower to minimize the risk of casualties. “Air warfare remains distinctly American—high tech, cheap on

lives, and quick; to America's enemies—past, current, and potential—it is the distinctly American form of military intimidation.”²⁴ In fact, a Brookings Institute study that examined 215 international incidents short of war between 1946 and 1975 involving the U.S., concluded that land-based airpower was the most effective form of military power:

It would appear that positive outcomes occurred more frequently when land-based combat aircraft were used than when major ground force or naval force components were introduced. It is worth noting that, like nuclear-associated units, land-based aircraft were never used as a latent instrument. It is likely that target actors view the distinctive capabilities of these two types of forces with greater alarm and that they also perceive their use as signaling greater determination on the part of U.S. policy makers.²⁵

Implications

The U.S. Navy has a long tradition of using sea power, or gunboat diplomacy, for coercive diplomacy. Some analysts contend “airpower may replace naval power as the United States’ weapon of choice in international conflicts short of war.”²⁶ In fact, it probably already has. If we are able to intervene successfully without risking a significant number of lives or incurring high logistics costs, we may find it easier to consolidate domestic and international will. The big payoff for *air occupation* could be the ability to intervene sooner, when the risks are lower and the chances of success greater.²⁷ A telling example is Bosnia: how much easier would the conflict resolution be in this *now* war-torn region if we had intervened before the atrocities and ethnic cleansing of the 1990s had occurred? The underlying economic problems that ultimately rekindled the ethnic embers would have been far easier to deal with in an atmosphere of only “historic” tension. Nonetheless, we must be wary of mistaking *air occupation* as a quick fix to

problems that require a long-term commitment to achieve lasting conflict resolution.

Looking back at the British air control experience in Iraq:

The most serious long-term consequences of ready availability of air control was that it developed into a substitute for administration. The speed and simplicity of air attack was preferred to the more time-consuming and painstaking investigation of grievances and disputes.²⁸

A primary concern should be the fear of making intervention too easy by substituting airpower for logic. We may find infeasible interventions being executed because we have significantly reduced the cost of being wrong. “The availability of low-cost, low-risk options borne from new techniques and new technologies may tempt us to make the mistake of intervening in unwarranted cases, intervening because we *can*, rather than because we *should*.”²⁹ In fact, many of the early U.S. interventions were characterized by unclear goals that made the definition of success (i.e., a better state of peace) nearly impossible to determine.³⁰ The dilemma of deciding if we *should* become involved is only going to get more difficult as we face a growing constellation of ethnic, religious, and nationalistic conflicts. In addition, if the scenario is uncertain, the decision to extricate ourselves may be equally difficult. The current operations “protecting” the Kurds and Shiites in Iraq are perfect examples of this dilemma: what is the *achievable* end state that will signal success and allow total redeployment of U.S. airpower? U.S. foreign policy and intervention trends indicate a growing need for a less costly and lower risk alternative to “troops on the ground.” Airpower could fill this need, but there are dangerous implications the U.S. Air Force must be prepared to cope with—in this case, ignorance is not bliss.

Notes

¹Eliot A. Cohen, "The Mystique of U.S. Air Power," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 1994, 109.

²Elvira K. Fradkin, *A World Airlift: The United Nations Air Police Patrol*, (NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1950).

³*Ibid.*, v-vi.

⁴*Ibid.*, v.

⁵Lt Col David J. Dean, *Airpower in Small Wars: The British Air Control Experience*, (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: AU Press, April 1995), 2.

⁶*Ibid.*, 4.

⁷*Ibid.*, 9.

⁸The White House, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, February 1996, i.

⁹*Ibid.*, ii.

¹⁰Adam B. Siegel, *The Intervention of Haiti*, (Virginia: Center for Naval Analyses, 1959), 1.

¹¹*A National Security Strategy*, iii.

¹²*Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹³*Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷Donald M. Snow and Dennis M. Drew, *From Lexington to Desert Storm*, (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 318.

¹⁸Karen Lingren, et al, *SIPRI Yearbook 1990: World Armaments and Disarmament*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 1990), 393-419.

¹⁹Arnold Kanter, *US Intervention Policy for the Post-Cold War World*, (NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 16-17.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 16-17.

²¹Stephen R. Shalom, *Imperial Alibis*, (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 3.

²²*Ibid.*, x-xi.

²³*Ibid.*, xi.

²⁴Eliot Cohen, "Mystique of US Air Power," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 1994, 120.

²⁵M. Blechman and Stephen S. Daplan, *Force Without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument*, (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1978), 101.

²⁶Captain James O. Poss, *Air Power: The New Gunboat Diplomacy*, Naval Command and Staff Paper, Air University Document M-U 41662 P856a, 16 June 1994.

²⁷Kanter, 26.

²⁸Peter Slugett, *Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932*, (London: Ithaca Press, 1976), 269.

²⁹Kanter, 19.

³⁰Snow and Drew, 315.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

My message . . . is that the pioneering days of aviation are not over. Fully developing and exploiting airpower is an enduring challenge. In particular, the Air Force has specific responsibilities for ensuring airpower serves the nation which we must discharge ever more effectively in the future.¹

—Major General Charles D. Link

Air occupation is an intellectually interesting yet contentious concept. This is familiar territory for airpower advocates that have faced skepticism for decades—in many cases, a byproduct of promising too much. Of course, if we allowed our vision and theories to be defined only by what the “masses” thought was possible, we would probably still be relegated to mail delivery and observation duties. As the only full-time airpower service, the U.S. Air Force has a singular responsibility to explore and validate new applications of air and space power. We must not allow ourselves to get stuck in the rut of “mainstream” doctrine. In the words of Carl Builder:

We are accustomed to seeing doctrine grow, evolve, and mature, particularly where doctrine applies to what we care most about—our traditional roles and missions in the mainstream of the Air Force. We seem to have more difficulty with nurturing doctrine off the mainstream roles and missions—what I call the doctrinal frontier.²

Although Mr. Builder makes a valid point, evolving doctrine should also be flexible and honest enough to *exclude* new airpower roles that are unnecessary or frivolous, even

if they are technologically possible—there must be more to airpower theory than “we can, therefore we should.” In a world of dwindling budgets the U.S. Air Force must be honest brokers with the nation’s limited resources. Consequently, it must be wary of accepting roles and missions that will have little impact on the *vital* interests of the nation, but consume tremendous resources either because of their singular cost or uncontrolled frequency. The only way to bring clarity to what Mr. Builder labels the “doctrinal frontier” is to ask and answer the right questions early in the process.

What Do We Mean By the Term Air Occupation?

The term *air occupation* can be very perplexing. Unfortunately, neither the term *air occupation*, nor the word *occupation*, is defined in Joint or Air Force doctrine—only the legal implications of the term “occupation” can explain this void. Of the many historic occupation objectives, *air occupation* most likely applies to less intrusive scenarios that attempt to coerce, enforce sanctions, or create buffer zones. Probable *air occupation* tasks to achieve these objectives would include a combination of presence, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, psychological operations, humanitarian airdrops and airlift, and punitive strikes. The U.S. Air Force may reduce some of the intellectual resistance to *air occupation* by using the term *air intervention* instead. This would unload the parochial and legal baggage associated with the word “occupation” and link it to the extensive discourse on intervention theory.

What Are the U.S. Foreign Policy Implications of Air Occupation?

General Fogleman equates the problems of today’s complex multipolar world to the heads of the mythical serpent Hydra—when one is cut off, two grow in its place.³

Although the U.S. Air Force cannot solve all our nation's military problems alone, it may be able to solve some of them. The concept and practice of exclusive reliance on airpower to achieve national objectives is not new—there are historic precedents. The U.S. Air Force must define those situations where exclusive use of airpower may be the most desirable and effective. The warning from Dr. Larry Cable should be heeded to ensure “jointness” does not become dogma:

Correctly employed joint oriented doctrine allows the orchestration of complementary capacities for the several forces under a unitary chain of command. Improperly employed it allows for the policy equivalent of the Special Olympics in which everyone gets to play and everyone is rewarded from mere participation regardless of the effectiveness or success of their having taken part.⁴

The current National Security Strategy criterion for costs and risks that are commensurate with the interest at stake, coupled with U.S. intervention trends, indicates there will be a growing “market” for an *air occupation* option. The big payoff for *air occupation* could be early consensus to intervene sooner, when the risks are lower and the chances of success greater. Nonetheless, we must be wary of mistaking *air occupation* as a quick fix to problems that require long-term commitment to achieve lasting conflict resolution. Our task is to ensure U.S. leaders understand the allure of “low cost” intervention and guard against its misuse. A primary concern should be the fear of making intervention too easy and substituting airpower for logic—intervening because we *can*, rather than because we *should*.

Bottom Line

Even if you disagree with the broad answers provided in this paper, the *questions* are still valid and must be answered before embarking on a serious campaign to “win” the *air*

occupation debate. *Air occupation*, or alternatively, *air intervention*, is a viable concept as long as we understand that it is not appropriate for all scenarios. As the only full-time airpower service, the U.S. Air Force must develop and publish *air occupation* doctrine to provide guidance on what it believes to be true about applicability, objectives, tasks, techniques, and procedures. This doctrinal development and assessment process should include the “battle labs” recently created by the U.S. Air Force to provide “a place where new ideas will be taken seriously.”⁵ Although the U.S. Air Force should focus on key strategic, rather than supporting, roles and missions to preserve its autonomy, it must also ensure the concept of *air occupation* is not oversold to the point of creating a “market” that dominates its existence. Every sortie and dollar committed to unnecessary roles and missions is a resource lost to preparing for the military’s primary task as defined in *Joint Vision 2010*: to fight and win our nation’s wars.⁶

Notes

¹Maj Gen Charles D. Link, “Airpower’s Maturity,” remarks delivered at the fall meeting of the National Capitol Flight, Order of the Daedalians, 10 October 1995.

²Carl Builder, “Doctrinal Frontiers,” *Airpower Journal*, Winter 1995, 1.

³General Ronald Fogleman, *Defense Issues*, Vol 10, No 1, American Defense Preparedness Association Symposium, 15 December 1994, 1.

⁴Dr Larry Cable, “Getting Found in the Fog: The Nature of Interventionary Peace Operations,” 17.

⁵William Matthews, “Got an idea? Contact a battle lab,” *Air Force Times*, 27 January 1997, 28.

⁶*Joint Vision 2010*, Joint Staff Study, 1996, 4.

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